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Swallowing the Soap

William Kloefkorn

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William Kloefkorn

New and Selected Poems | Edited and
with an introduction by Ted Genoways

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Land of Heart's Desire,
Where beauty has no ebb, decay no flood,
But joy is wisdom, time an endless song.

*William Butler Yeats,
"The Land of Heart's Desire"*

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 “Driving Through the Winnebago Reservation on my Way to
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 “Memory,” “Living Without It”
Nebraska Life: “Learning to Soar,” “Newborn”

Introduction

A Life Like Yours

TED GENOWAYS

Bill Kloefkorn is too goddamned nice. Not his poems, mind you—they are filled with the tough-talking, clear-eyed, lovely, bloody, holy, backslid thoughts of the poet on his epic journey from a hard-scrabble boyhood in Attica, Kansas, to the book-minded life of a professor in Lincoln, Nebraska. His poems know the hard ways of the world, the kind of lessons that leave scars and wisdom and sometimes achieve love but lead us, no matter what, to the grave. There's a generosity to the poems that imbues them with a sweetness and humor uncommon in contemporary American verse, but they're not trying to bullshit anyone. They're haunted by losses great and small—from the dead of Hiroshima burned alive by the atomic bomb to Bill's aged father crushed by a drunk driver. The poems are daring and honest and accessible and lasting, and more people would know it if Bill weren't so goddamned nice.

He has spent a career, now spanning forty years, willingly—even contentedly—publishing in the relative shadows. For a decade he gave his poems to anyone trying to make a go of publishing poetry from the Midwest—Roadrunner Press, Windflower Press, Apple Press, Pentagram Press, Wolfson Press, Uzzano Press. A virtual roll call of boosters and true believers who lacked the business acumen to get their books noticed, much less make their authors any income. Frustrated by those trials, Bill tried his hand at publishing, founding Platte Valley Press with Charles Stubblefield and bringing out four books of his own under the imprint. Along the way, he was named the State Poet of Nebraska. The not-quite-laureateship was created to avoid ruffling the feathers of lovers of John G. Neihardt (who remains the Poet Laureate of Nebraska in perpetuity), and the selection process was something of a circus to boot. Despite the chaos, the legislature emerged with the right man for the job—better, I would argue, than any other official ambassador for poetry our country has produced.

For more than a quarter century, Bill has accepted any and all invitations to speak about poetry, read poetry, teach poetry to the people of Nebraska.

I have seen him speak to packed houses at the Nebraska Literature Festival, and I have heard him speak to my mother's reading club in the living room of my parents' house. He's always the last to leave, to make sure anyone who wants to talk to him has the chance. Maybe most important, he has traveled tirelessly to elementary schools and high schools across the state, getting young people interested in the power of language. That's how I met Bill. My high school English teacher sent him poems of mine—and he responded to them with comments (which, I assure you, they did not warrant). He encouraged me to apply to the Nebraska Scholars' Institute, a summer program for high school students where he taught. After that workshop, he suggested I apply to Nebraska Wesleyan, where I was lucky enough to be a student of his for four years. Except, of course, I'm still a student of Bill's. He still teaches me, by example not dogma, that the real work of poetry happens on the page, and it gets passed on in the classroom.

I saw Bill once adrift in the grand ballroom of some cavernous conference center in Kansas City for the annual gathering of the Associated Writing Programs. He looked like Odysseus returned from his travels—a stranger in his own land. In a field that has become bizarrely commodified, Kloefkorn is a throwback. He's never lobbied for prizes, angled for high-profile jobs, or managed his career in the way so many poets do now. He taught his whole career at Nebraska Wesleyan (including Freshman Composition, right up to the end) and let his poems, and later his memoirs, be his advocates. There's a humility to it and a distinctly Great Plains sense of not calling attention to yourself. It's fed the work, but it's also left Bill in the almost singular position of being widely beloved among readers and underappreciated among poets.

I sincerely hope that this book will grab the poetry community by the lapels and show it the error of its ways. Keats wrote of reading Homer for the first time: "Then I felt like some watcher of the skies when a new planet swims into his ken." I imagine more than a few young poets will experience such awe and exhilaration on looking into this book. But, more than that, I hope that it will serve as a single-volume overview of Bill's remarkable poetic output that will appeal to his legion of fans who have only glimpsed a shadow of his magnitude by finding a few poems in slim volumes and out-of-print editions in used bookstores. There is a long overdue piecing together here, the first true retrospective of Bill's body of work, and it is a wonder to behold. Maybe now he'll finally get the literary recognition he deserves to go along with his popular appeal.

Something tells me Bill doesn't care. His work has always been more about connecting with his readers than dazzling his doubters. That's why his poems focus on clarity in their craft, the world around him (rather than the minutia of his private life) in their subject matter. The result is something far greater and rarer than the usual ego trip that a volume of new and selected poems represents; this is not the culmination of a career, it is the measure of a life. A life well lived and well written about. A life of enduring loss and soul-saving joy. A life spent striving for truth, not laurels. And yet, a life like any other. A life like yours. A life like mine.

Walt Whitman wrote of *Leaves of Grass*: "Who touches this book touches a man." Bill Kloefkorn would never say such a thing about this stunning collection of poems—he's too goddamned nice—so let me say it for him. These poems aim for nothing less than the impossible: to understand what it means to be alive and human on this moveable earth, and they succeed. They *succeed*. That's more than mere artistry. Whoever you are, this is not just a book you hold in your hands; by God, you're touching a man.

Swallowing the Soap

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Eating Mulberries for Breakfast

Mostly purple, purple becoming snowdrift
as sugar falls from the small mouth
of the dispenser,

purple you gathered from the tree just
yesterday, your little brother
above you lost almost

in branches of purple, purple rising
in the bowl as the thick milk
rises, and with a silver spoon

you begin to eat what you know
your buddy Gene will laugh at
when you tell him, if you

tell him, snowdrift sugar and purple
berries and white Jersey milk
succulent in the mouth,

across the table your little brother
dribbling rivulets of juice,
slurping and dribbling

and chewing and purple teeth delighted
beyond delight, and you think
to hell with your buddy Gene,

your better-off buddy who doesn't know
what's good and what isn't, who
doesn't have the brains

he might have been born with, who doesn't
have a little brother like mine who,
when the moment is ripest,

goes out on the very highest limb.